New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

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Theatre Openings

"They Knew What They Wanted"

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"They Knew What They Wanted"

New York World-Telegram

FEBRUARY 17, 1949

Revival With Muni Packs Real Wallop

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

In this day of psychiatric curiosity and ancient mental motives in the drama, "They Knew What They Wanted," is refreshing and sincere with its straightforward emotions.

The 25-year-old play packs a real theatrical wallop. There is nothing complicated about its story or people. Everything is there to see and understand without effort. For this is a play whose characters do things because of what they are right now, and nobody worries much about what made them that way.

In brief, it is the story of Tony, along in years now, who finally has been put on easy street by his vineyards, thanks to the providence of prohibition. A hard worker, he has decided he can afford a family, and has concluded his wooing by correspondence.

With naive cowardice he has sent Amy a photo of his young foreman. The girl is in for a further shock when she arrives to find that Tony has bolstered his courage to meet her with a great deal of wine, and broken both his legs in an auto accident on his way to the station.

Affair With Foreman.

This emotional turbulence inevitably leads Amy into a brief affair with the foreman, Joe. The rest of the play concerns Tony's warm, characteristic solution to the consequences of this romance.

There is really only one moment in all this which the opening audience found dated to the point of being hard to accept. Three months after their affair, Amy has visited a doctor who informs Joe she is pregnant, and Joe has to tell her. It is rather sad that the quality of innocence involved in this incident should no longer strike an audience as being believable.

For the rest it is a play rich with character, put together with neat concentration, and rises to a high-powered climax that must satisfy everybody on both sides of the footlights. It is presently acted with an admirable sense of proportion.

Wealth of Personality.

A big reason that Tony is a role to attract a star, is that he has a wealth of personality which the play offers strictly limited chances to develop and sustain. The instant Paul Muni enters he establishes a warm spirited simplicity, and in a few moments it is clear that this man is stubborn, passionate and clear thinking.

If his innocence is unquestioned, it is because it springs from his innate purity and the contented limits of his ambition. Through the second act, Muni must play immobile in a bed, but he never ceases to add to the childish enthusiasm and the warm Latin temperament of the character, as a fiesta goes on outside.

On crutches in the last big scene, the star plays a bravura passage with consuming sincerity.

Gives Infinite Support.

Carol Stone gives him infinite support as Amy, a role that demands a wide range of emotion and great control.

Her opening scene is a tour de force, in what amount to a monologue as she shyly tries again and again to establish some sort of intimacy with the man she believes she is to marry. Her transition to accepting the unexpected situation with Tony is entirely touching, and she brings off the flamboyant final sequence with great assurance and taste.

Edward Andrews is husky and bumptious as the radical migrant, Joe. Charles Kennedy delivers the dry warnings of the Priest, and Henry Burk Jones reads the doctor with a taking comic rhythm.

'THEY KNEW WHAT THEY WANTED'

Play by Sidney Howard; staged by Robert Perry; production designed and lighted by Frederick Fox; presented by John Golden at the Music Box Theatre, February 16, 1949. The cast:

Joe.....Edward Andrews
Father McKee..Charles Kennedy
Ah Gee.....Francisco Salvacion
Tony.....Paul Muni
The R. F. D.....John Craven
Amy.....Carol Stone
Angelo.....Danny Leone
Giorgio.....Victor Rendina
The Doctor....Henry Burk Jones
First Italian Mother.....
Delores Badaloni
Her Son.....Joseph Italiano
Second Italian Mother....
Eole Gambarelli
Her Daughter....Dolores Brown
Farm Hands.....Misses Jo Van Patten and Madelon Morka, and Messrs. Jimmy Mereno and Gerald Teddy.

Synopsis: Tony's farmhouse in the Napa Valley, Calif. Act 1—Morning, in early summer. Act 2—Evening, the same day. Act 3—Three months later.

Journal American

FEBRUARY 17, 1949

Carol Stone Excels In Howard Restaging

By ROBERT GARLAND

In John Golden's "new presentation of the Pulitzer Prize Play for 1924-1925, Sidney Howard's "They Knew What They Wanted" isn't up to expectations. And even if a professional first-nighter is supposed to know the why and wherefore of every sort of theatre thing, the real reason for last evening's disappointment isn't known to me.

When, amid the verities of a non-atomic time, the Theatre Guild first brought out what Mr. Golden can call the "old presentation" of "They Knew What They Wanted," I've no recollection of Mr. Howard pointing to his play as a modern retelling of the medieval double-crossing of Uncle Mark by the manly Tristan and the frail Isolda.

But now, at the Music Box, Sidney Howard is quoted as insisting that "They Knew What They Wanted" is "shamelessly, consciously and even proudly derived" from the Mark - Tristan - Isolda doublecrossing. Which, to think of it, may help solve the uncertainty of last evening's 45th Street disappointment.

In the November of 1924, the Theatre Guild offered "They Knew What They Wanted" as a comedy in three acts. Which it is! In the February of 1949, John Golden offers "They Knew What They Wanted" as a "Tristan and Isolda" in California. Which it isn't!

* * *

Dead or alive, Sidney Howard can't persuade me that Tony is the Mark who was a King, that Joe is the Tristan who was a Knight, that Amy is the Isolda who was a Princess. Not even if their words were written by Alfred Tennyson and set to the music of Richard Wagner. Tony, Joe, and Amy aren't of heroic mold!

Only Amy, a little. Played originally by Pauline Lord to the Tony of Richard Bennett and the Joe of Glenn Anders, Amy remains alive enough and tick-ing in the care of Carol Stone. But Tony, by Paul Muni, and Joe, by Edward Andrews, are run-of-the-theatre angles in the familiar triangle.

So, even in its "new presentation," "They Knew What They Wanted" again tells how Mark, who's Tony, sends for Isolda, who's Amy, and is double - crossed by Tristan, who's Joe. Mark's a good guy, all right, but he drinks too much and thinks too little for his own play. And, once in love with Amy—

Well, there's a happy ending to Sidney Howard's "Tristan and Isolda," a happy ending in which Mark and Isolda live lovingly together, along with Tristan's baby. Tristan can return whenever they send the station wagon for him.

* * *

There's acting going on at the Music Box. Paul Muni is more active in his acting than the others. Pretending to be Tony, Mr. Muni's a "character actor" if ever there was one. He makes good use of everything he was born with. And a couple of crutches he has acquired. Plus a deep Italian accent.

Looking and listening as Joe, Edward Andrews is a quiet and soft-spoken double-crosser. To keep the Mark - Tristan - Isolda combination good and growing, I hope Tony and Amy send for him often. As the Doctor, Henry Jones is dryly delightful. Charles Kennedy, sole member of the original cast, remains faithful to Father McKee.

But, playing safely between the over-playing of Paul Muni and the underplaying of Edward Andrews, Fred Stone's daughter Carol turns in the most creditable characterization at the Music Box. Her Amy, or Isolda, is a fine follower of Barbara of "Dark of the Moon" and Sabina of "The Skin of Our Teeth." A rolling Stone gathering glory, Carol . . .

Even so, under Robert Perry's diffuse direction, against Frederick Fox's undistinguished background, the cast assembled by John Golden is left with "Tristan and Isolda" in its hair, "They Knew What They Wanted" on its hands and the late Sidney Howard's best known play without a really right revival.

New York Herald Tribune

FEBRUARY 17, 1949

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Still a Good Play

AFTER a quarter of a century Sidney Howard's prize-winning play, "They Knew What They Wanted," retains form, substance and feeling. The Paul Muni revival at the Music Box, sponsored by John Golden, leaves something to be desired. The star is too insistent upon Italian dialect in his characterization of an aging Napa Valley vintner who marries a mail-order wife from San Francisco and has the nobility to condone a momentary infidelity. The Robert Perry staging is jerky, while some of the lesser performances are downright bad. The drama itself still has the grandeur and variety which have distinguished it through several stage and screen productions since 1924.

• • •

Muni was most wise in selecting Carol Stone for the role of the California stray, portrayed originally by Pauline Lord. Except for a few nervous moments, she makes Amy a character of depth and persuasion. When she confronts her crippled husband with the fact that she is going to have a baby by his overseer she pulls the play into a clear and stirring focus. She brings fine shading to a part which moves from sullen resentment at having been tricked into a marriage to an old man to a genuine love of Tony. June Walker had the role in a revival and Carole Lombard in a motion picture. Miss Stone is right up to them in realizing the possibilities of the part.

• • •

Muni lacks no sincerity as Tony. His wild celebration on the arrival of a bride whom he has never seen, which causes him to break both his legs in an automobile accident, is a piece of ebullient make-believe. His grave wooing of the girl is restrained and convincing, particularly when he is giving her a pair of diamond ear-rings. His acceptance of what might have been a tragic blow in the ending is plausible. If anything, his portrait is too studied. The garbled Italian - English which he delivers may stem right from the Napa Valley, but it does not aid much in holding a tale of betrayal and redemption in a taut dramatic unity.

• • •

Edward Andrews plays Joe, the Wobbly whose photograph has been sent to a hash house waitress by Tony, and Charles Kennedy appears in his original role as Father McKee, the Irish priest who foresees no good of the marriage. The others in the Golden company are only adequate to their assignments. Frederick Fox has designed the production pleasantly. "They Knew What They Wanted" is a fine play, given no more than indifferent execution in its current revival.

The Sun

FEBRUARY 17, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE

Prize Play Fades a Bit.

Sidney Howard's human and salty and colorful comedy, "They Knew What They Wanted," first shown to a grateful Broadway a quarter of a century ago, was presented last evening at the Music Box. It has lost some of its gusto and some of its flavor, and there is quite a good deal lacking in the new performance. The production is offered by John Golden.

"They Knew What They Wanted" won the Pulitzer Prize for the season of 1924-25. It was revived in 1939, and it has taken its place in the ever-changing theater of the present century as a gentle and warm-hearted comedy, written in the idiom of the American scene. But last night at the Music Box it was all rather pallid.

Here, of course, is the tale of the sentimental and lonely old Tony, grape-grower of the vineyards of the Napa Valley of California, who conducts a courtship by mail with a waitress in a spaghetti house in San Francisco. He sends along a photograph of Joe, his young foreman, instead of one of himself, and it's with this same Joe that the confused and bewildered Amy, a few hours after becoming Tony's bride, commits her only misstep.

Three months later, when Tony learns that his adored Amy is bearing a child not his own, and knowing that she has come to love him, that he applies simple reasoning to the solution of what seemed momentarily a problem of tragic proportions. He is getting a baby, for which he has craved. Amy has a home, and Joe has his freedom and can be on his way. They all got what they wanted.

Paul Muni, one of the ablest of our actors, is only partially successful in his playing of the simple-hearted Tony. He gives a showy performance, relying upon grimaces and mannerisms, without actually getting into the feeling of the character and without bringing the old fellow to life.

Carol Stone, playing the role created by the incomparable Pauline Lord, is competent and vigorous and earthy, but does not project Amy's desperation and helplessness. Edward Andrews misses the casualness in the character of Joe, given to a fruit-tramp's roaming of the State of California. Charles Kennedy is testy and fussy and believable in the part of Father McKee, which he played in the original production. Henry Burk Jones makes a real character of the doctor.

This new production has excellent atmosphere; the staging of Robert Perry is first-rate. So is the setting of Frederick Fox. But "They Knew What They Wanted" is definitely mild in revival.

New York Post

HOME NEWS

FEBRUARY 17, 1949

Sidney Howard Drama Loses Some Power

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

The years have been but moderately kind to "They Knew What They Wanted," which John Golden revived at the Music Box last night. The late Sidney Howard's Pulitzer Prize-winning play of 1924 still has atmosphere, vitality, some racy characterization, and a fine, mellow, tolerant point of view, but it has lost a great deal of its emotional impact and excitement in two and a half decades, which is a long time in the theatre. Where it once seemed a deeply moving and engrossing drama, it is now a fairly interesting one.

In considerable part, the change in the quality of audiences is to blame. When, in the original production, Amy, the forlorn waitress, and Joe, the Wobbly, learned that a baby was to be the result of their hysterical affair on the very night of Amy's marriage to her crippled husband, the shock to public morals was enough to bring about a jury examination of the play. Last night, at the same scene, there was some idiotic laughter in the audience. It certainly wasn't the playwright's fault, but it was not helpful to his drama.

Paul Muni

In addition, I am afraid that the skillful and painstaking Paul Muni was not altogether guiltless of responsibility for the play's comparative lack of poignant emotion. Mr. Muni, of course, played the role of poor old Tony, who courted by mail and sent his prospective bride a picture of his stalwart young hired hand, with thoughtfulness and feeling, but his portrayal was so ornate, so filled with elaborate detail, that most of its simple emotional appeal was drained from it. He rarely managed to be a plausibly pathetic figure.

It is obviously unfair to Carol Stone, who plays Amy, to compare her performance with that of Pauline Lord, who acted the part memorably in 1924, since few of today's audience will have seen Miss Lord's characterization. Indeed, Miss Stone is quite effective in the role. But it is the essence of Amy's character that she is completely vanquished when she arrives at Tony's ranch and that her marriage to the old man represents her last chance at security. Skilful as she is, Miss Stone is far too buoyant and dashing to seem bedraggled and beaten.

The Other Roles

The lesser roles struck me as more satisfactorily managed. Edward Andrews might well have made Joe, the carefree I. W. W. organizer, a more colorful figure, but he plays the part sympathetically and believably. Henry Burk Jones, who used to bill himself simply as Henry Jones, gives a quietly delightful performance as Tony's long-suffering doctor, making a great deal out of a small part, and Charles Kennedy, who played the priest in the original production and again in the 1939 revival, is once more warm and mellow as the kindly cleric.

It was perhaps the greatest virtue of Mr. Howard as a dramatist that he knew how to write roles that give actors fine, full-blooded emotional opportunities, and there are scenes in "They Knew What They Wanted" that possess authentic truth and power. The air of tolerant understanding and ready human sympathy with which he studied his simple people and their uneasy passions continues to give his play warmth and compassion. Unfortunately, in the current version, the result is but intermittently arresting.